

A conversation between Lee Grandjean and Nell Croose Myhill, Outpost Gallery, 3rd November 2016.

NCM: It was great to come to your studio and to hear you talk about how you have approached this new body of work for OUTPOST, and how you had been thinking about the name of the gallery...

LG: Well it chimed in with my own story of coming to the country from the city and deliberately wanting to be out of the milieu, and seeing what it was like living without the constant stimulation of shared studios and the general buzz of people making art.

I remember when I came to the country I became more aware of vertical things, they were suddenly very important. When you are in this open landscape of Norfolk, a post can be a metaphorically significant thing: a vertical on the edge of a field, a telegraph pole. In this puzzle about what one makes, coming out of the milieu and being in the country was interesting, getting back to some fundamentals. We are human beings, we stand on the earth, we are the vertical. When you lay down, you're dead. You know, there is something revelatory about basic body positions in how we see the world. How our bodies are, is how we approach and how we inhabit the world. So that brings us to this work, which is quite a lot about bodies. The dragging of heavy feet, lumbering body parts, from pendulous noses to fragile legs. The standing and the fallen and all the sorts of exaggerated movements that are a human body, any body, engaging with the world. Often in emotional and fearful times, the body goes into certain kinds of movements, doesn't it? Running from things, or reacting in fear. There is a sort of grotesque side to these works. It has always been there, close to humour, but also to something a little more scary, a bit nightmarish, fractured and slightly disturbing. I mean, when I see the work after I've been working on it, these things become evident, clearer. I work in that way, I work with improvisation, nothing is designed, although there are general areas which are being explored.

NCM: For example?

LG: making the shape of the body in extremes, or the reduced body, or sorts of exaggerated gesture. I am always trying to invent a new body, really. Caro talked about how it feels to be in a body. Make the sculpture of how it feels to be in a body, rather than the appearance of the surface of the figure. And these just take that a lot further- they are all legs, noses, slices through arms, body organs. The insect body comes into it, even to a certain extent, the microscopic body. How we and the body stuff of the world moves, drags itself along. There is an element of survival -this is coming back to OUTPOST again- and that sense of the thing alone. What are we when we are reduced to our basics? And so I think of things, the materials, I think of things of having survived something, you know?

NCM: I remember you gave a talk that I attended a while ago and you showed images of sculpture that you burnt? And how that explored the idea of survival?

LG: Yes, I do destroy work, I have destroyed many things. When I used to work in wood, and not much else, it was easier, because you could put it on the bonfire, I love a good bonfire with work burning. There is always a stage where, in the fire, you see the most beautiful core form, reduced to its essential parts.

Now, although these pieces in OUTPOST are visually quite noisy and certainly not minimal (I am more of a maximal kind of artist!) I think they are as reduced as I can make them. Wanting to get to the raw core of things. I had this vision sometime ago, an imaginative narrative, that when everything collapses, there will be a

compost of all things, of all structural and organic things mixed up in the mud of cities, concrete, dust and so on, and that out of this general debris, hybrids of being, might emerge That's a sort of creation myth, that gives ground for these things to emerge.

That's another sort of outpost- survival, something against the elements slightly, something that is having to push against erosion continually.

I think my recent small paintings have that sense about them, something standing and being blown by the wind. In fact, I called all these small pictures after the main wind directions: easterly, northerly, southerly, westerly. They have a sense of something being blown through, or being scoured but holding on, just. They are having to win their position on the canvas, as it were, and they are literally scraped across, very simple charcoal drawing being scraped over with another colour.

NCM: Can we talk a bit more about titles? So this show is called: Yes, let's go. *They do not move*.

LG: It is the last spoken line from Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. A character says 'Let's go', in a way that sums up the whole of the play because they have been waiting for this character Godot who never appears, and things happen whilst they are waiting for this character. So the dilemma continues into the very line, 'Let's go', but then there's a stage direction, from the playwright, which is in brackets, and it says 'They do not move' (Laughs). So in a sense this impossibility of action continues right at the end. I read a book of dialogues between Beckett and a guy called George Duthuit, and he talked about making -of writing, which was his making- and how it was, it is, impossible. How there is nothing to say, nothing to say it with, nothing to say about, it goes on like that, in negatives. But at the end, he says that it is accompanied by the desire/the necessity of saying, so this is where we are, when you feel that in order to live, you have to understand the world through making it, or remaking it. And yet, you are faced with the dilemma of everything having been made, and so you have to negotiate this place of absolute doubt. I try to bring that into how I work, I would want to be true to that sort of spirit in the works' construction.

There is another aspect to those lines, they seem to me, to clarify the condition of sculpture that I celebrate. The fact that they are not literally anything other than artefacts, bits of dead stuff: the materials that they are made with, wood, plywood, mesh, scrim, cement, and paint; and yet, I believe in the transformation that goes on, sculpture transcending its literal state and becoming something else, that is all implicit. It's of some kind of animate energy, and yet they are inanimate. I think that's why my process often has a fractured look, parts and passages between, shift continually. That gives them visual movement which I am happy with. And of course I then paint them in a certain broken way... statement and contradiction, so it goes..

NCM: There is a restlessness...

LG: A restlessness! Yes, It's great that you use that word, because I would want them to be unhappy in their form, in a way. They are not Barbara Hepworth, you know that beautiful rounded, wonderfully reduced smoothness. All that thing about British Sculpture, you want to touch it? Well, if you touch this you might get cut. It's not, and I don't want it to be, smooth. So, its jagged and the pictures are jagged and gestural.

NCM: Can we talk a bit about the relationship between the paintings, the drawings and the sculptures, and how they function in the space?

LG: When I finally left working at the Royal College in 2010, and I was in the studio all the time, one of the things I wanted to do was to make more of this pictorial world, because in a way I wanted to test out why I used colour in sculpture. Why my sculpture was so painterly? What would happen if I actually entered that pictorial world, working into that world, would my sculpture become very different?

Curiously, the more I painted, the more the paintings turned into more fixed, sculptural things, with hard outlines and a thing in space and the sculpture became more gestural, and more like an object in painting.

I had always made characters and I wanted to give them a background, or to house them, or to place them in a certain landscape, so that paintings could be that place, or to use a theatre analogy, a backdrop to these actors. Coming back to Beckett, I think there is a theatrical aspect to how I work, and that's usually a pejorative term in art- 'too theatrical', you know. But I embrace it, I can see that there are ways of using it, which can, I think, work. So the backdrop, almost like a shadow of things, or the kind of general movements of the crowd and these (points to sculptures), the subject, you know the one that's pulled out of the crowd. And the small canvases were done alongside the sculpture. So it all went on side by side, and it went on all this summer, everything was made this summer.

NCM: And the green sculpture was only finished last week?

LG: Yes, I made this one last week. I wanted to test out a greater covering of the underlying structure with more modelling of a continuous form, without so many fractures. It was problematic, the colouring of it, in fact the colouring of all of them is problematic. So, I wanted to make something that was a bit more of a continuous surface. When I painted it, it was awful. So there were many changes of colour and the only way I could deal with it in the end, was to erode it, abrade the surface, literally sand the surface, to get back to the underneath...

NCM: To the core?

LG: Yes, to the core, and that fits in with that survival thing. You know, when you see objects that have been sent to outer space and come back (I think the Science Museum have a nose cone), the surface is very evidently scoured, used, burnt, scratched. And so the way of dealing with my 'clogging' surface was to go back through the layers and bring back the cement. I've called it 'Graze'.

NCM: It feels to me, like you are constantly pushing at the limitation of the object, or the limitation of the object in its environment, and maybe that object could be understood as the body itself?

LG: The thing has to survive me, and I have to survive myself. There is always a stage in everything I do when it is impossible. It's not working. And the only way you can do it, is to actually engage and to sort it out, and to go on and on until either you do destroy it, or you throw it away. Or you find a way that it convinces. Beauty is nothing to do with it- I am not after beauty- I don't mind ugly. Awkwardness, and lumpy, and the disabled, is actually more truthful- despite everything it survives, and that is the condition of them, which is another 'Outpost' related thing. Despite the world saying "no... it's never going to work". I am sure that the people who started this great venture, would not have called it OUTPOST, unless they felt there was some kind of fight they were engaging in.

NCM: Against the odds?

LG: Yeah, and the things I make are against the odds. They are against the odds of making anything in this world, where everything seems to have been made, and how do you find a thing that can exist its own way, that has some kind of authenticity. Its not easy. You try and be true to that struggle, without it sounding as if there is no joy...You know, I love doing this, I run to the studio!